



Canadian Policy Research Networks, 600-250 Albert Street, Ottawa, ON K1P 6M1 Tel: 613-567-7500

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## The Youth/Ballot Box Disconnect

What's up with young Canadians and the ballot box? Young voters are particularly reluctant to take part in the electoral process. You might think that the stereotypical description of youth as apathetic or irresponsible is the reason behind this. But CPRN's experience with young people paints a very different portrait.

On March 7, 2007, CPRN held a workshop with a diverse group of young men and women to explore what participation and citizenship means to them and hear their ideas about what can be done to encourage and support more young adults to participate in civic and political activities.

The workshop probed a range of questions including:

*What does participation mean to you? What does it mean to be a citizen? What opportunities and barriers encourage and discourage your participation?*

The spark for this workshop came from CPRN's 2005 National Youth Dialogue and Summit with 144 randomly-recruited young Canadians, which led to the realization that our participation models and practices need to change if they are to support young people to become and remain civically and politically active.

Here's a taste of what we learned from the workshop:

- Developing a **personal identity** gives confidence to engage – you need to know who you are and where you stand. Identity is shaped, in part, by connections with others.
- Young people are **feeling the burden of mistakes** by generations older than them. They feel they are expected to save the world, reverse climate change and find a way to make health care sustainable. To paraphrase one participant – “we're told to fix things but the tools we get are a few nails and no hammer.”
- **Participation should bring results.** Volunteering for a cause or a community need gives immediate results in contrast to formal politics.
- Young people are turned off by **politicians fighting to score media points** instead of focusing on the real issues with the people who elected them.
- They feel a **personal responsibility to be informed** about issues in order to be active. As one participant said, “Politics is about everything...you cannot escape it so you might as well understand it.”
- **Families and peers** are important influences on active involvement. Many young people see the Internet as a sub-peer group.
- **Political parties are seen as boring**, old, partisan and not at the forefront of taking action on society's challenges.
- Politics should be more about the challenges we face and that **engagement between elections is missing the mark.**
- **Media can be as much a barrier as an incentive** to participation because of superficial or negative political coverage.

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Here's what they think needs to change:

**1. How youth learn about and are prepared for active citizenship: « Il faut ouvrir nos horizons! »**

- Civics education needs to start earlier, be part of all courses and linked to real issues that are important to youth and their communities.
- Schools should be a safe place **to openly** discuss challenging issues, learn about different points of view, and develop skills for critical analysis and problem solving.
- Education should focus on responsibilities as well as rights.
- Learning by doing works better than lecturing. As one participant noted, “You cannot educate an interest – you can only nurture it.”

**2. Political institutions and practices**

- Political institutions need to better reflect youth, women, Aboriginal people, and our ethnocultural diversity. Have an electoral system that makes everyone's vote equally meaningful.
- Political parties need to proactively reach out to youth **AND** focus more on policies and less on the electoral machine.
- Politicians need to be visible and involved face to face with their communities and not only at election time. Discuss real issues with young people and not just harp on the need to vote.

**3. Supporting Indigenous youth engagement**

- Our political institutions and processes need to do a better job of reflecting the Indigenous perspective.
- Much can be learned from Indigenous values in addressing societal challenges (e.g. environment, human rights, community governance).
- Students need better education about Indigenous peoples' history, traditions and realities and their role in Canada.
- Youth-led groups need resources and mentors to provide active spaces, not just run-down buildings, for youth to interact with each other and their communities.



Participants from the Youth Civic and Political Participation workshop held at CPRN on March 7, 2007.

**4. How we think about and support youth participation**

- Youth need to have real responsibilities and opportunities to influence decisions. Token engagement only leads to frustration and alienation.
- Governments and other organizations need to demonstrate they care about the issues youth are interested in and use language and tools that youth can relate to.
- Young people are not a homogeneous group. Different options and approaches are needed to appeal to youth in the city or rural areas, and youth with different backgrounds and different interests.
- Families need to ensure exposure to news, discuss current affairs and help youth develop critical thinking skills.

These young people had much more to say – many found the day too short. We hope to build on their ideas and offer some concrete recommendations for policy and community actions to support young people in becoming active citizens. In the coming months you will see these ideas reflected in a series of research papers CPRN commissioned to explore a variety of issues related to youth civic and democratic participation.

For more information on the project, contact Mary Pat MacKinnon at [mmackinnon@cprn.org](mailto:mmackinnon@cprn.org).

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